



Acts 12:1-25

On June 6, 1944, a German soldier woke up, peered outside his pillbox and saw the entire Allied fleet before him. The invasion of Europe was unfolding before him. What did he do? The same as you - he prayed! "Not a church-prayer, but a real one!"

Recap this morning and mention how we need to make that step from good intentions to action. We are called to be a People of Prayer if we want to see God build His church here and to make us strong in Him. We looked at the famous incident in the Old Testament where Daniel was thrown into the Lion's Den because he prayed to God in defiance of the royal ruling that Darius had been conned into making. What conclusion we came to was that prayer makes a difference in our lives and the lives of others, but not the kind of one minute jobbie that many Christians indulge in, but time spent regularly in the presence of God, honouring Him and listening to His voice. And that works in a corporate sense as much as in an individual sense. I give you this quote:

Lyle Schaller writes, "While it is impossible to prove cause and effect, the evidence strongly suggests that those churches that places a highly visible emphasis on the power of intercessory prayer have a higher ratio of worship attendance of membership than those that give it low visibility."

Prayer makes a difference. But how much do we really believe it? I want to develop that a bit this evening by looking at a very similar kind of event in the New Testament. It perhaps underlines more than anything why we need to spend time in prayer, particularly when difficulties come – as they inevitably will. At the beginning of our story we see how persecution hit the church again – this time more fearsome than the last wrought by Herod Agrippa 1 who seemed to want to try and impress the Jews.

Historical note: The Herod of Acts 12 was Herod Agrippa I. He was born in 10 B.C., the grandson of Herod the Great, who slaughtered the infants in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. "Grandpa" Herod assassinated his son, Agrippa's father, when Agrippa was only three. He went to Rome with his mother and grew up on close terms with the imperial family. He was a playboy and had to flee Rome to escape from his creditors. He spent some time in prison, but the emperor Caligula released Herod and assigned him as king of the northernmost provinces of Palestine. Later he was given all of the territory that had formerly belonged to his grandfather, which he ruled until his death in A.D. 44. The apostle Paul would later stand trial before his son, Agrippa II.

He was a bit of a lad and his family trait was that he was quite prepared to kill to further his personal and political ends – so he kills the apostle James, son of Zebedee and then has a go at Peter – jailing him ready for execution. So in some ways it's rather like this morning's story – a vain king and a man of God under threat of death.

It's an interesting story. Herod captured and killed James and then he imprisoned Peter pending execution. James died. Peter was miraculously rescued. Both were part of the "special three" Jesus took aside at the Transfiguration. Why did James die and Peter get the miracle? It's an important question because we pray for people and some stay sick or die, and some have a miracle. How do we deal with that? Someone wrote this about James and Peter:

Jesus loved James and John just as much as He loved Peter. But He allowed James to die and John to mourn the loss of his brother, but He delivered Peter. And He offered no explanation! Perhaps He was teaching the church that no man is indispensable to His cause. The death of James did not

hinder the spread of the gospel. Perhaps He was teaching them to trust Him when they did not understand what He is doing. But whatever the lessons, John and the rest of James' family would have been greatly mistaken to conclude that somehow God did not love them as much as He loved Peter. As someone has observed, we must always interpret our circumstances by God's love, not God's love by our circumstances.

God has His purposes. Ours is not to question them, but to interpret our circumstances by God's love. It's quite an interesting perspective. Prayer is about a relationship with God that means we trust Him whatever.

For example if Daniel had asked the question this morning along the lines of "Why is God doing this to me when I've always honoured Him" then he would have been questioning God's wisdom. He didn't, he just trusted that God knew what He was doing – and one of the great leaders in world history came to recognise the power of the living God!

In our modern day, exactly the same is true. For as many good stories we hear of mission and missionaries, there are sad ones too:

Richmond, Va. (AP) - About 330,000 Christians a year are martyred for the faith around the world, says the Rev. David Barrett, a noted religious statistician. He said one in every 200 workers on the mission field is killed. "If you are a Christian worker on the frontiers of evangelism in a non-Christian society you are a marked man or woman," he said.

So here we have a church in Jerusalem, mourning the loss of James and it would appear waiting for the same to happen to Peter. What could they do? Pray.

And from this passage and referring back to Daniel, we can learn much for ourselves about prayer.

◆ Trust that God knows what He's doing

The contrast is interesting between those praying for Peter and Peter himself – another man of prayer.

What was Peter doing on this last night before his execution? He was asleep on a hard wretched cell floor, chained to guards, worried about nothing! He was not wringing his hands, pacing back and forth, pleading for an attorney, crying out of fear, or explaining his innocence . . . he was asleep! What was he thinking about?

Quite so. Whether he lived or died, it was in the knowledge that God knew what he was doing. He had confidence in God because he was close to Him. When we go through difficulties in life, do we rest confident in God or do we worry?

He didn't know he was going to be rescued – he thought it was a dream until he found himself in the street! **9 Peter followed him out of the prison, not knowing, however, if what the angel was doing was real; he thought he was seeing a vision.** This story is the first of many - I know of three Sundar Sing, Brother Yun and Jaime – all the same sort of story – all a surprise! The lesson – listen for the voice of God when you pray. Peter rested in the fact that God was in control but he wasn't like one of those prisoners I read of in a Yorkshire jail who find prison life so comfortable that they don't try to escape even when someone provides an opportunity. He saw the opportunity that God was offering and took it even though he thought it was just a dream! Be ready for the voice of God – be ready to get up and follow Him – even if things don't make sense!

◆ Pray with Passion

5 So Peter was kept in jail, but the people of the church were praying earnestly to God for him. The believers prayed earnestly, fervently – they said it and meant it. *The word translated fervently is a medical term describing the stretching of a muscle to its limits. Same word used to describe Jesus' prayer: Luke 22:44 -- And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground. It means that they poured the maximum effort they were capable of into their prayers.*

They were passionate. I have had quite a lot to do with Africans and prayer in many African cultures

is usually loud and animated. Some people say “why do they need to shout so loudly – God can hear them”. Yes He can but it’s not about volume, it’s about passion. These folk are passionate about speaking to God – it’s about them, not God. Someone once said this:

God is not limited by the prayers of His people, but He works through our prayers to teach us to depend totally on Him.

The issue is that prayer brings us closer to God. It isn’t just a case of personal prayer, but of corporate prayer. Corporate prayer is dying in most churches. Prayer meetings are dropped, or turned into Bible studies or combined with something else.. There is a great need for effective prayer meetings – and they can exist. Some of the most dynamic times I’ve had as a Christian have been prayer meetings.

God wants us to be passionate about meeting with Him. Not for His sake but for ours as we come before Him. We have seen the efficacy of prayer in our studies today – all we need to do is fill the gap between the word of God and what we do. Prayer makes a difference!

◆ Pray Expectantly

It’s one thing to have fervent prayer, expectations are another thing. They prayed, but when Peter appears at the door, no-one is prepared to believe it really is Peter until he has been banging on the door for quite a while! What is our expectation in prayer? We are asked to pray for people on a week to week basis – what is our expectation of what God is going to do in their lives?

William Carey – *Expect great things of God, do great things for God.* We need to affirm our faith again in a God who does great things. *Their prayer was earnest, but their faith was not overwhelming. Little faith can accomplish great things if it is placed in the great God. David Guzik*

How does God answer prayer? He can do it while we are still praying. We should not receive God's surprises with disbelief but with joy born of expectation, that "blend of confident trust and sanctified imagination"(Ogilvie 1983:204).

What should we get out of today? First of all that prayer makes a difference – to us who pray and for the people we pray for. The best quality prayer is when we spend time with God individually and as a church. There is no substitute for it. If we want the blessing then we need the presence of God! And spending time in His presence will give us that peace to know how to act in every situation and to expect the unexpected from a God who can do amazing things!